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FURTHER PROMOTION AND ENCOURAGEMENT OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS, INCLUDING THE QUESTION OF THE PROGRAMME AND METHODS OF WORK OF THE COMMISSION

Written statement submitted by the Baha'i International Community, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV).

[1 April 1997]

United Nations Decade on Human Rights Education

1. One of the most striking features of this century is the transformation technical and scientific advances have brought to all forms of human interaction. Modern means of travel and communications have contracted our planet, and created a global web of commerce, migration and intellectual and scientific exchange that has made discussions of global interdependence commonplace.

2. Despite the overwhelming evidence of our interdependence and increased contact with diverse peoples, differences of culture, language and religion are still considered grounds for suspicion and hostility. Even in countries where people of different faiths and ethnic backgrounds have lived side by side for generations, ancient rivalries and suspicions lurk just below the surface, ready to erupt with disastrous consequences for human rights.

3. To defuse these conflicts and to protect human rights a new foundation of universal understanding - a new framework of values within which diversity is seen not as a threat but as an aspect of our common humanity - will be required. Laying this moral and ethical foundation for what some have referred to as "a universal culture of human rights" is one of the most important aspects of human rights education.

4. In the Baha'i view, the foundation of universal understanding and, therefore, for human rights education is the oneness of humanity, a spiritual principle amply confirmed by all the sciences. Anthropology, physiology and psychology recognize only one human species, albeit infinitely varied. If we see ourselves as members of one human family, interconnected and interdependent, we will be unable to violate the rights of another member of that family without feeling the pain ourselves.

5. Violations of human rights are sometimes a misguided expression of loyalty. Human rights education, by applying the principle of the oneness of humanity, can help people to see that loyalty to a large entity does not necessarily conflict with loyalty to a small entity. We live and work in many social units and institutional environments, often nested one within the other, that are complementary and often mutually supportive. Love of one's country does not preclude love of family or community; rather, it enlarges the circle of relationships.

6. The enlargement of social organization from clan to nation State has opened new opportunities for the expression of human capacity, as it has expanded the circle of those deemed deserving of recognition and respect. For stability in any social organization, the rights of all, including minorities need to be respected. Current conflicts in Africa and in Europe involve gross violations of human rights, some based on ethnicity, others on religious belief, which are destructive of the foundations of society. The evolution of ever-larger circles of organic relationships and interactions now embraces the entire planet. As we educate our children to accept diversity as part of the human condition and to extend respect and full human rights to the entire human family, civilization will benefit from an unimaginable wealth of contributions.

7. In that respect, human rights education could be considered basic education for life in the modern world. According to the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century, learning to live with others, which necessitates respecting their rights, is one of the major issues in education today. The Commission also points out that children and youth are coping with special tensions that come from living in a contracting and interdependent world. Among them are the tension between the global and the local: people need gradually to become world citizens without losing their roots; the tension between the universal and the individual: culture is steadily being globalized, but as yet only partially; and the tension between the spiritual and the material. Human rights education grounded in the principle of the oneness of humanity, can provide children and youth the tools and the philosophical framework to enable them to resolve those tensions for themselves.

8. Religion has an important role to play in human rights education. In his report on the preparation of a plan of action for a United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education, the Secretary-General noted that the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action stated that "Education should promote understanding, tolerance, peace and friendly relations between nations and all racial and religious groups" (A/49/261/Add.1-E/1994/110/Add.1, para. 6). Historically, religion has always shaped the laws and social values that determine how individuals treat each other. The Secretary-General also called for education directed to "the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity" (para. 15 (b)). Religion teaches people who they are and why they are here and calls them to transcendence and service. "Noble have I created thee", Baha'u'llah asserts, "yet thou hast abased thyself. Rise then to that for which thou wast created". Religious convictions empower individuals to confront their own character defects, to root out undesirable behaviour, and to cultivate such virtues as truthfulness, compassion, trustworthiness and generosity. These spiritual qualities - taught by all religions - are conducive to nobility and to respect for the rights of others.

9. The worldwide Baha'i community has historically been a strong supporter of United Nations human rights programmes and activities. In 1947 Baha'is presented a statement on human obligations and rights to the newly formed United Nations Commission on Human Rights. As soon as the United Nations established 10 December as Human Rights Day, national and local Baha'i institutions began planning commemorations. Over the years, Baha'is have circulated widely the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in a number of languages. When the United Nations adopted conventions implementing the various articles of the Universal Declaration, Baha'i communities worldwide disseminated these documents, held public meetings to explain them and, in some cases, participated in efforts in their countries to ratify them.

10. The Baha'i International Community has invited all 174 national Baha'i councils to lend their support to the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education.

11. Finally, it is important to bear in mind that changing attitudes and values after they are formed is inevitably a difficult and gradual process. Therefore, human rights education efforts should be concentrated on reaching children and youth, who are still in the process of forming the values that will shape their lives. Instilling in our children respect for themselves and others, recognition of the oneness of humanity, appreciation of unity in diversity, and a sense of citizenship in a world community will be the best guarantee of improved protection of human rights in the years to come.